



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 6, 2013

Presbyterian Church USA Drops Hymn Over “Wrath of God”

The Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA) has pulled a popular modern Christian hymn from the latest edition of its hymnal because the composers refused to grant permission to alter a phrase in the song that refers to God’s wrath. [Baptist Press News](#) noted that the hymn “In Christ Alone,” penned in 2001 by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, “consistently ranks in the top 20 songs sung in churches of all stripes, according to Christian Copyright Licensing International. Yet it contains one line that the PCUSA’s Committee on Congregational Song did not wish to include in the denomination’s hymnal.”



The controversial line, from the song’s second verse, reads: “Till on that cross as Jesus died/The wrath of God was satisfied.”

The PCUSA’s hymn committee had a problem with God being portrayed in the song as wrathful, and asked the writers for permission to change the problem stanza to, “Till on that cross as Jesus died/The love of God was magnified.” The author’s refused, explaining that they had written the song to present the “whole gospel,” and in their view changing the line would compromise the message.

In all fairness to the PCUSA, the hymn committee had actually noticed the changed lyrics to the hymn appearing in a Baptist hymnal published in 2010 and assumed that the alternate lyrics had already been approved by Getty and Townend. But when the committee sent its request for permission it learned that the authors had not approved the change.

The committee ultimately decided by a nine to six vote to drop the song from the PCUSA’s upcoming *Glory to God* hymnal, rather than keep the line about God’s wrath. “The song has been removed from our contents list, with deep regret over losing its otherwise poignant and powerful witness,” committee chair Mary Louise Bringle wrote in an article in the May issue of [Christian Century](#). She explained that the majority of the committee felt the hymn as written “would do a disservice” to the educational mission of the hymnal by perpetuating the “view that the cross is primarily about God’s need to assuage God’s anger.”

But Bringle told the [Nashville Tennessean](#) newspaper that it would be a mistake to assume that the theme of God’s wrath had been sanitized from the new PCUSA hymnal. “People think that we’ve taken the wrath of God out of the hymnal,” she said. “That’s not the case. It’s all over the hymnal.” She cited such hymns as “Oh Sacred Head Now Wounded” to demonstrate that the idea of Jesus’ atonement for the sins of humanity was still a major theme throughout the hymnal. The problem with the lyrics, she emphasized, was the notion that God’s wrath was “satisfied” by Christ’s death.

However, Carmen Fowler LaBerge of the [Presbyterian Lay Committee](#) told OneNewsNow that she



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thinks the PCUSA committee was wrong in its decision. “God, in his self-revelation in the Bible, reveals the reality of both His love and His wrath, His grace and His wrath,” she said. “The satisfaction of His wrath by the act of Christ upon the cross is certainly biblical.” She added that “for the denomination to remove this hymn from the hymnal is, I believe, an expression of its moving away from biblical theology and adopting a theology that is not biblical.”

News of the change prompted similar commentary from conservative evangelical Christians circles, where the liberal slide and theological compromise of denominations like the PCUSA have been discussed for years. For example, Timothy George, dean of the Beeson Divinity School at Alabama’s Samford University, wrote: “Sin, judgment, the cross, even Christ have become problematic terms in much contemporary theological discourse. But nothing so irritates and confounds as the idea of divine wrath.”

George told the *Tennessean* that he didn’t see the PCUSA move as “isolated case. It fits into a wider pattern of downplaying parts of Christian doctrine that are offensive.”

Dr. Denny Burk, a professor at Boyce College, a Southern Baptist school in Kentucky, said the move did not surprise him. “Although not all PCUSA churches are theologically liberal, the denomination by and large is,” Burk wrote on his personal website, [dennyburk.com](#). “Liberalism and wrath go together like oil and water; they don’t mix. And historically speaking, one of them eventually has to go. When wrath goes, so does the central meaning of the atonement of Christ.... At the end of the day, the cross itself is the stumbling block, and that is why the PCUSA cannot abide this hymn.”

Russell D. Moore of the Southern Baptist Convention’s [Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission](#), sounded off on the controversy, writing in the *Washington Post* that as an evangelical Christian, “I would argue that it’s necessary to sing about the wrath of God, because we are singing not just from and to our minds, but to and from our consciences.”

Moore explained that when Christians sing about God’s wrath “we are singing about ourselves. Our consciences point us to the truth that, left to ourselves, we are undone. We’re not smarter or more moral than anyone else. And God would be just to turn us over to the path we would want to go — a path that leads to death.”

He added, however, that “it is only because Jesus lived a life for us, and underwent the curse we deserve, that we stand before God. The grace of God we sing about is amazing precisely because God is just, and won’t, like a renegade judge, simply overlook evil.”

Moore concluded that while he is “hardly one to tell Presbyterians what they ought to have in their hymnals,” in truth “the Gospel is good news for Christians because it tells us of a God of both love and justice. The wrath of God doesn’t cause us to cower, or to judge our neighbors. It ought to prompt us to see ourselves as recipients of mercy, and as those who will one day give an account. If that’s true, let’s sing it.”



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